

Brett Building
1210-16 11th avenue
Intown Neighborhood
Altoona
Blair County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-5507

HABS
PA.
7-ALTO.
97-

PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

BRETT BUILDING
HABS No. PA-5507

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Location: 1210-16 11th Ave., Altoona, Blair County, Pa.

Present Owner: Leonard S. Fiore, 5506 6th Ave., Altoona, Pa., 16602.

Present Use: A restaurant and architect's office on the first floor; offices on the second; apartments on the third, fourth, and fifth floors.

Significance: Most of the early twentieth-century buildings in Altoona's commercial district have detailing derived from Neoclassical sources. Retail clothier Jacob Brett chose a more "modern" idiom for his prestigious new department store and office building. Designed in 1922 by Julian Millard of Altoona, the Brett Building is one of the few downtown buildings that exhibit the design elements seen in the Chicago School of architecture -- vertical, tripartite zones; the division of the intermediate stories into vertical bands; and the use of low-relief, terra cotta ornamentation, especially at the cornice. Moreover, both the architect and the building's owner were influential on the state level: Brett was a prominent businessman, originally from Lithuania; and Millard, a widely respected architect, was named Pennsylvania's first Supervising Architect in 1924.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1922-24. Construction began October 1, 1922. The store opened March 6, 1924.
2. Architect: Julian Millard of Altoona was the architect. David Royer of Millard's firm (later the architect of the second U.S. Post Office) served as the project architect. Carol Hickey of Lancaster, Pa., was the consulting architect in charge of the 1984 restoration.

In Altoona's city directories, Julian Millard (d. 1951) advertised that he could--and would--build "anything." His firm's most important contribution to the Altoona streetscape, however, was probably the introduction of a conservative Chicago Style of architecture, as exemplified by the Brett Building and others like it. Millard was born in Three Rivers, Michigan and educated at the University of Michigan. After graduating with a degree in architecture from Boston Institute of Technology, he worked in his father's firm in Phoenix for five years, designing the Bank of Arizona and Carnegie Free Library at Phoenix. The renovation of the Blair County Courthouse brought Millard to Hollidaysburg, Pa., in 1907. He opened offices in the Hutchison Building in Altoona and soon gained a reputation as an architect of churches, schools, and commercial buildings.

Millard practiced in Altoona from 1907 until 1923, when he left to serve as Pennsylvania's first State Supervising Architect in Harrisburg, a post he held until 1932. The style of his commercial and institutional buildings can best be described as "functional" and "modern"--typically red brick, with flat wall surfaces, stylized pilasters, and applied terra cotta ornament at the cornice. Major examples of his work include the Theodore Roosevelt Junior High School and the Altoona Mirror Building on Green Avenue. In addition, Millard was probably responsible for the design of Jacob Brett's large, Prairie-style residence on Logan Boulevard in Llysven, and other related examples on Broad Avenue. These attributions are based on stylistic evidence alone, documentation to support these claims is lacking.

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Millard was also active in the community. He belonged to the Chamber of Commerce, Masons, Rotary Club, and Art Institute, and was a member of the Blair Hotel Company's Building Committee, which was responsible for selecting the design and materials used in the construction of the Penn Alto Hotel. (Millard obituary, Altoona Mirror [September 25, 1951]; see also Mirror [December 19, 1923 and June 28, 1932].)

3. Original and subsequent owners: On June 6, 1922, Jacob Brett acquired the site from the Pennsylvania Railroad Company for \$154,000. The purchase price included the three-story, Italianate superintendent's residence that was razed to make way for the Brett Building later in 1922. Although the property changed hands during the 1960s and 1970s, it remained in the Brett family until 1979, when declining sales--partially the result of the demolition of several adjoining commercial shops--forced the store to close. The Brett Building was sold to its current owner in 1986. (For the complete chain of title, see deed books: 290/523; 312/148; 334/365; 992/916; 1021/827; and 1037/37)
4. Contractor, suppliers:

Structural engineer: W. A. Hoyt, Central Trust Building, Altoona
Structural steel and steel stairs: Furnished and erected by Altoona Pipe and Steel Co., 1925 9th Ave.
Facing bricks: Altoona Brick Co.
Marble and tile work: Altoona Marble and Tile, 1114 1/2 12th St.
Plaster, sand, finishing lime: Furnished by Collins-Harter Supply Co., 1004 4th Ave., Juniata
Glass and finishing hardware: W. H. Goodfellow's Sons, 1319 11th Ave.
Paint and varnishes: Altoona Glass and Paint Co., 1315 12th Ave.
Plumbing fixtures: Tierney and Sons, 809 17th St.
Decorative painting: Art Craft Studio
(Altoona Mirror, [March 5, 1924], 19-29.)
5. Original plans and construction: The Brett Building was constructed to house Brett's Department Store on the basement, first, and mezzanine floors. The three upper floors had offices, twenty-two on each floor, and a penthouse containing four additional offices. On the exterior, a terra cotta stringcourse marked the different uses, visually separating the commercial stores on the first floor from the offices on the second through fifth. The storefronts and interior have been renovated many times, although the original office plan appears to be unaltered.

Like the First National Bank (1924-25), Penn Alto Hotel (1920-21), and Silverman Building (1924-25), which were also constructed during the boom decade of the 1920s, the Brett Building anticipated the possibility of future expansion. The structure was built so that up to two additional stories could be added at a later date.
6. Alterations and additions: Like the ever-changing fashions of the goods sold within the store, the Brett Building itself was constantly being updated to pique the curiosity and interest of the consuming public. As early as 1925, a large electric sign spelling "BRETT'S" in different colors was erected on the building. Again, in 1927, the Altoona Mirror noted that the selling floors had undergone renovation. In 1931, the basement store was enlarged 40' back to the alley; this necessitated the reduction of the stockroom area. A concrete fur storage vault ("the kind usually reserved for big cities") measuring 25' x 42' was installed in the basement in 1935. (Altoona Mirror: [June 4, 1925, 24; March 15, 1927; February 10, 1931; April 16, 1935])

Brett's underwent extensive interior remodelings in the 1940s. A photograph from an August 19,

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1942, article in the Altoona Mirror shows the entire mezzanine railing covered with plaster; only the top of the original oak handrail is visible. The right stairway to the mezzanine was also removed at this time. Renovations in 1946 included the replacement of the floor and wall display cases, relocation of offices, and installation of new, shadowless fluorescent lights. New departments were also created to focus the customer's attention on promising lines of goods. (Altoona Mirror: [June 8, 1941; June 20, 1946])

In 1956, Brett's opened a men's specialty store on the southwest side of the building. The shop had its own entrance off 11th Avenue and a "discreet" side entrance in the court to the left of the store. The walls of the men's shop had cypress panels; the floor was laid in tile.

In 1966, Brett's received an Indiana limestone storefront with seven display cubicles capped by copper-lined, aluminum awnings. The display windows were shallow, almost flush with the sidewalk. The selling floor was expanded to include the original lobby area.

The Brett and adjacent Central Trust Buildings were cleaned and restored in 1984. After a careful search for historical materials, Brett's storefront was restored to its earliest documented appearance--ca. late 1930s. The first and mezzanine floors were renovated to accommodate new commercial shops and a restaurant; in some cases, this involved the removal of original interior walls, and the blocking of some original partitions. Some of the offices on the upper floors were remodeled, while others were converted into luxury apartments.

B. Historical Context:

Born in Lithuania, Jacob Brett came to Altoona in 1891, opening his first women's clothing store at 1309 11th Ave., in 1914. When the store could no longer expand, Brett purchased the site of the PRR superintendent's house, which he razed, and began work on the five-story Brett Building.

In order for Brett to build on the 11'-wide lot that the Central Trust Company had acquired next to his building, Brett agreed to tie the floors of his building to those of Central Trust, and provide access to both. According to an agreement between the two parties, Central Trust would construct the first story of the connecting stair tower and install one elevator. Brett would finance the construction of the upper stories and install a second elevator in the lobby. The upper floors of the Brett Building were leased to the Central Trust Company, which became responsible for their care and operation. This deal explains why the plaque on the stair tower reads "CENTRAL TRUST BUILDING," although it was clearly constructed as part of the Brett Building.

When it opened March 6, 1924, Brett's Department Store was described as a "magnificent merchandizing emporium." Indeed, the store had a carefully worked out merchandizing strategy. "One flight down to lower prices" was the slogan for the basement store, which was devoted to less-expensive, ready-to-wear lines and linens. The basement was the least attractive part of the store, but it drew customers anyway because it featured goods that were considered inexpensive or essential. The first floor had silks, clothing, lingerie, and leather goods, along with small, impulse items such as hosiery, cosmetics, and perfume.¹

The store's curved stairway and elegant mezzanine design enticed customers to the upper floor, where the most expensive clothing lines were displayed. These items included "high class coats, millinery, gowns, and shoes," according to an early newspaper advertisement. All of the merchandise was originally kept in glass cases and displayed on racks when customers requested to see specific items. Overall, the amenities of the department store--hand-painted wall and ceiling murals, statuary lamps, Persian rugs, mahogany

¹"New Brett Store to Open Thursday," Altoona Mirror, (March 5, 1924).

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furnishings, etc.--helped to equate shopping with a genteel way of life.²

Brett remained active in the day-to-day business of the store until 1962; he died two years later at the age of 87. Brett's Department Store continued to occupy the building until 1979, when it closed its doors for good. In 1984 the building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The building's flat, red-brick facade is highlighted with glazed headers and low-relief, glazed terra cotta ornamentation. Four pilasters help give a vertical emphasis to the design.
2. Condition of fabric: Excellent.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The five-story, I-shaped building measures 70' x 120'; the attached entrance to the Central Trust Building at 1216 11th Ave. measures 11' x 120'.
2. Foundations: Not visible.
3. Walls: The storefronts are restored to resemble their ca. 1930s appearance. They have black awnings above the plate-glass front, and a clerestory transom window with an inset, stained-glass panel that reads "BRETT'S." The upper stories are finished in deep red tapestry brick laid in Flemish bond with glazed headers. This portion of the facade consists of six bays separated into four sections by pilasters with stylized, terra cotta ornament. The pilasters extend from the top of the first story to the top of the fifth story. The upper portion of the building, above the fifth story, is ornamented with blue and white glazed terra cotta designs and the words "BRETT BUILDING." The side facing the Central Trust Building is laid in buff brick in running bond. The rear facade is red brick laid in common bond. The first story of the stair tower and elevator lobby is finished with glazed terra cotta in a regularly coursed, ashlar pattern with rusticated joints. Its upper stories match the rest of the Brett Building.
4. Structural systems, framing: Steel and reinforced-concrete with 16" brick curtain walls.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The main entranceway, which contains a pair of glass and aluminum doors, is recessed behind the new storefront. There is a secondary entrance to the restaurant from the court between Brett's and the Central Trust Building. The entrance to the stair tower is round-arched, with limestone voussoirs and an ornamental keystone. The tympanum of the arch is infilled with a fixed-transom sash.
 - b. Windows: The original storefront was fitted with 40' x 40' plate-glass windows which were described as the "finest and classiest" display windows in Altoona. The upper

²Altoona Mirror (March 5, 1924). Susan Porter Benson, "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940," Radical History Review 21 (Fall 1979): 199-221.

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stories have rectangular window openings, with tripartite, Chicago-style sash. These consist of three one-over-one-light, double-hung sash topped with three single-light, fixed transoms. The windows on the side and rear facades have concrete sills.

6. Roof: A parapet wall with tile coping obscures the false wood roof.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First: The main entrance leads to a deep inner vestibule and a second set of glass and aluminum doors. Several short steps lead down to the sunken first floor, which was originally the department store selling floor.
 - b. Mezzanine: The mezzanine, which encircles the entire store, was originally reached by two stairways located on either side of the first-floor entranceway. Only the left stairway remains. This floor was also occupied by the offices of the cashier, telephone exchange, and advertising department. In addition, an arcade connecting Brett's with the Central Trust Building was at one time accessible from this floor; it has since been removed. Several interior walls have also been removed to accommodate Ellsworth's restaurant, which opened in 1986.
 - c. Third-Fifth: The typical floor plan consists of double-loaded, I-shaped corridors with offices (or apartments) on both sides. These rooms vary in size, but the majority measure 14' x 20'. Fire doors connect the third through fifth floors of the Brett Building to those of the Central Trust Building, which also contain offices and/or apartments.
2. Stairways: A steel stairway providing access to the upper floors is located in the elevator lobby to the left of the building. The stairway has marble treads, an oak handrail, and turned metal balusters. The stairway to the mezzanine has an oak handrail and a cast-iron, Gothic-arched baluster design. A third, concrete stairway located in the southwest corner of the building, serves as an interior fire escape leading to the ground floor.
3. Flooring: The entrance vestibule was originally laid in red tile; the first floor had a birch floor; the mezzanine floor was covered with Persian rugs. The first and mezzanine floors now have wall-to-wall carpet; the upper floors have marble hallways. The stair tower has a marble floor as well.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The entrance vestibule originally had "high class paintings" on the walls and ceiling; these were restored during the 1984 renovation. The rest of the building has plaster walls and ceilings. The first and mezzanine floors are now painted teal and mauve and have wallpaper friezes.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Typical interior doors have two rectangular panels, and flat, wood surrounds. The second- through fifth-floor doorways have tripartite, rectangular transoms that extend beyond the door on either side.
 - b. Windows: New storefront on the first floor; the windows of the upper stories are surrounded by flat wood frames.

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- c. Skylights: There are two bands of skylights in the roof over the mezzanine floor. Originally, they were of domed, wire glass; during the 1984 renovation, however, the skylight openings were replaced with flat sash.
- 6. Original furnishings: A grand-opening announcement noted that the department store was "fully furnished with mahogany furniture."
- 7. Mechanical systems:
 - a. Heating: Vapor steam vacuum system.
 - b. Lighting: A variety of elegant and dramatic "ornamental lamps" were located on all floors. The entrance vestibule had four lamps with hand-painted shades; the stairway down to the basement store was flanked by several "marble statuary lamps" which added dignity to this less attractive area.
 - c. Air conditioning: In July 1939, Brett's installed a York air-conditioning system capable of producing 20 tons of ice a day.
- D. Site: The Brett Building stands on 11th Avenue, facing southeast. It shares a party wall with the First National Bank of Altoona.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

- A. Original architectural drawings: An original blueprint drawing of the fifth-floor plan signed by Julian Millard is in the possession of Leonard S. Fiore, 5506 6th Ave., Altoona, Pa.
- B. Early views:
 - 1. According to Leonard Fiore, the earliest views of the Brett Building date to the 1930s or early 1940s. The personal collection of Donny Brett (c/o Meyer Jonasson, 1226 11th Ave., Altoona), provided the major source of information for the 1984 restoration project.
 - 2. A photograph captioned "compliments of Ahe Cohen, 1931," provides a view of the 11th Avenue streetscape. In this view, Brett's storefront seems to closely resemble the current restoration. Collection of Mellon Bank Central, Altoona, Pa.
- C. Interview: Leonard Fiore, Jr., contractor for the 1984 renovation and present owner, interview by Nancy Spiegel, Altoona, Pa., July 20, 1989.
- D. Bibliography:
 - 1. Primary sources:
 - Altoona Mirror:
 - "Attractive Interior of Remodelled Brett's," (August 19, 1941).
 - "Big Realty Deal is Consummated," (June 27, 1922).

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"Brett's Begins Remodeling," (February 2, 1956).

"Brett's Plan Two-Floor Modernization," (June 20, 1946).

"Brett's Store is Being Enlarged," (February 10, 1931).

"Brett's Store One of City's Finest," (April 28, 1925).

"First Floor of Brett's Changed," (June 8, 1941).

Millard, Julian. Obituary. (September 25, 1951).

"Modern Building Planned by Brett," (August 30, 1922).

"New Brett Store to Open Thursday," (March 5, 1924). This issue includes a ten-page advertising supplement by Brett's.

"Pennsy is Selling Supts.' Residence," (June 25, 1921).

"Ribbon Cutting at Brett's New Store Planned," (May 17, 1966).

"Sign is Illuminated," (June 4, 1925).

"Workmen Begin Remodeling Brett's Store," (January 1, 1966).

Deed Books. Blair County Courthouse, Hollidaysburg, Pa.

Insurance Maps of Altoona, Blair County, Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1909.

Insurance Maps of Altoona...Pennsylvania. New York: Sanborn Map Co., 1932.

2. Secondary sources:

Benson, Susan Porter. "Palace of Consumption and Machine for Selling: The American Department Store, 1880-1940." Radical History Review 21 (Fall 1979): 199-221.

O'Bannon, Patrick W. National Register Nomination for the Central Trust Company Buildings, 1984.

E. Additional Sources:

1. For more information on the restoration project, one should contact Carol Hickey (230 Harrisburg Ave., Lancaster, Pa., 17603), who served as the architect for the restoration.
2. Altoona Morning Tribune (June 28, 1922; October 12, December 18, 1923; and March 6, 1924 [opening]) were unavailable in Altoona, but should be consulted for additional information on the construction of the Brett Building.

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This report was part of a larger project to document the city of Altoona, Pennsylvania. The project was undertaken

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by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), Robert Kapsch, chief, at the request of America's Industrial Heritage Project (AIHP), Randy Cooley, director. An overview of the history of the city (HABS No. PA-5784) and an overview of the downtown (HABS No. PA-5789) provide context for these buildings as well as a comprehensive list of sources. See also additional HABS reports on buildings in the city and other neighborhoods.

This report was prepared by Nancy Spiegel in the summer of 1989 under the supervision of HABS historian Alison K. Hoagland and Kim E. Wallace, supervisory historian. Spiegel's and other project historians' work was published as Railroad City: Four Historic Neighborhoods in Altoona, Pennsylvania (Washington, D.C.: HABS/HAER, National Park Service, 1990), edited by Kim E. Wallace and Sara Amy Leach, HABS historian.